Civil Disobedience Succeeds

I will tell you how it happened that I decided to urge the departure of the British. It was in 1916. I was in Lucknow working for Congress [the name Indians give the Congress Party]. A peasant came up to me looking like any other peasant of India, poor and emaciated. He said, "My name is Rajkumar Shukla. I am from Champaran, and I want you to come to my district." He described the misery of his fellow agriculturists. . . . The Champaran tenant was bound by law to plant three out of every twenty parts of his land with indigo for his landlord. . . .

[Gandhi was unable to finish other tasks until early in 1917.] [We] left Calcutta for Champaran looking just like fellow-rustics. . . . [A sympathetic lawyer named] Brajkishore Babu acquainted me with the facts of the case. He used to be in the habit of taking up the cases of the poor tenants. . . . Not that he did not charge fees for these simple peasants. Lawyers labor under the belief that if they do not charge fees they will have no wherewithal to run their households, and will not be able to render effective help to poor people. The figures of the fees they charged and the standard of a barrister's fees in Bengal and Bihar staggered me.

I have come to the conclusion [said I] "that we should stop going to law courts. . . . Where the ryots [peasants] are so crushed and fear-stricken, law courts are useless. The real relief for them is to be free from fear. . . ."

"We shall render all the help we can," [Brajkishore Babu] said quietly . . . "tell us what kind of help you will need."

And thus we sat talking until midnight.

"I shall have little use for your legal knowledge," I said to them. "I want clerical assistance and help in interpretation. It may be necessary to face imprisonment, but much as I would love you to run that risk, you would go only so far as you feel yourselves capable of going. Even turning yourselves into clerks and giving up your profession for an indefinite period is no small thing. I find it difficult to understand the local dialect of Hindi. . . . and . . . I shall want you to translate. . . . We cannot afford to pay for this work. It should all be done for love and out of a spirit of service." 2

"Such and such a number of us will do what-ever you may ask. . . . The idea of accommodating oneself to imprisonment is a novel thing for us. We will try to assimilate it." a

... I decided that I would talk to thousands of peasants but, in order to get the other side of the question, I would also interview the British commissioner of

1 Interview at Sevagram Ashram, June 9, 1942, in Louis Fischer, A Week with Gandhi, p. 97.


the area. When I called on the commissioner he bullied me and advised me to leave immediately. . . .

I received a summons to take my trial . . . for disobeying the order to leave . . . .

... I might have legally resisted the notices . . Instead, I accepted them all and my conduct towards the officials was correct. . . . [They] were put at ease, and instead of harassing me they gladly availed them-selves of my and my co-workers' cooperation in regulating the crowds [that had gathered around Gandhi's house]. But it was an ocular demonstration . . that their authority was shaken. The people had for the moment lost all fear of punishment and yielded obedience to the power of love . . . .

It should be remembered that no one knew me in Champaran. The peasants were all ignorant. Champaran, being far up north of the Ganges and right at the foot of the Himalayas . . was cut off from the rest of India . . .

... No political work had yet been done amongst them. The world outside . . was not known to them. And yet they received me as though we had been age-tong friends . . .

That day in Champaran was an unforgettable event in my life and a red-letter day for the peasants and for me. . .

... The government attorney pleaded with the magistrate to postpone the case but I asked him to go on with it. I wanted to announce publicly that I had disobeyed the order to leave . . . I told him that I had come to collect information about local conditions and that I therefore had to disobey the British law because I was acting in obedience with a higher law, with the voice of my conscience. This was my first act of civil disobedience against the British. My desire was to establish the principle that no Englishman had the right to tell me to leave any part of my country where I had gone for a peaceful pursuit. The government begged me repeatedly to drop my plea of guilty. Finally the magistrate closed the case. Civil disobedience had won. It be-came the method by which India could be made free.

What I did was a very ordinary thing. I declared that the British could not order me around in my own country. . .

[The] Collector wrote to me saying I was at liberty to conduct the . . . inquiry and that I might count on whatever help I needed from officials . . .

[The] situation . . . was so delicate and difficult that over-energetic reports might easily damage the cause . . . So I wrote to the editors of the principal papers requesting them not to trouble to send any reporters as I should send them whatever might be necessary for publication and keep them informed.

. . Incorrect or misleading reports . . . were likely to incense [the planters] all the more, and their ire, instead of descending on me, would be sure to descend on the poor fear-stricken. ryots and seriously hinder my search for the truth about the case.

In spite of these precautions the planters engineered a poisonous agitation against me . . . . But my extreme cautiousness and my insistence on truth, even to the minutest detail, turned the edge of their sword. . .

Those who took down the statements [of the peasants] had to observe certain rules. Each peasant had to be closely cross-examined, and whoever failed to satisfy the test was rejected. This entailed a lot of extra time but most of the statements were thus rendered incontrovertible.

. . . . . . . . . . .

As I did not want to irritate the planters but to win them over by gentleness, I made a point of writing to and meeting such of them against whom allegations of a


serious nature were made. . . Some of the planters hated me, some were indifferent, and a few treated me with courtesy. 8

[Gandhi's activity led to an official inquiry which] found in favor of the ryots and recommended that the planters should refund a portion of the exactions made by them . . . and that the [tithes] system should be abolished by law. 9

It was not quite possible to carry on the work without money. . . . I had made up my mind not to accept anything from the Champaran ryots. It would be . . . misinterpreted. [Appealing] to the country at large . . . was likely to give it [a political aspect. . . . I decided to get as much as was possible from well-to-do Biharis living outside Champaran. . . . We were not likely to require large funds, as we were bent on exercising the greatest economy in consonance with the poverty of Champaran. 10

As I gained more experience . . . I became convinced that work of a permanent nature was impossible without proper village education. . . .

In consultation with my companions, I decided to open primary schools in six villages. One of our conditions with the villagers was that they should provide the teachers with board and lodging while we would see to the other expenses. The village folk had hardly any cash in their hands but they could well afford to provide foodstuffs. Indeed, they had already expressed their readiness to contribute grain and other raw materials.

From where to get the teachers was a great problem. ... My idea was never to entrust children to commonplace teachers....

So I issued a public appeal for voluntary teachers. It received a ready response. . . .

I explained to them that they were expected to teach the children not grammar and the three R's so much as cleanliness and good manners. . . .

The villages were insanitary, the lanes full of filth, the wells surrounded by mud and stink and the court-yards unbearably untidy. The elder people badly needed education in cleanliness. They all were suffering from various skin diseases. So it was decided to do as much sanitary work as possible and to penetrate every department of their lives.

The teachers] had express instructions not to concern themselves with grievances against planters or with politics. People who had any complaints to make were to be referred to me. . . . The friends carried out these instructions with wonderful fidelity. . . . 11

The] volunteers with their schools, sanitation work and medical relief gained the confidence and respect of the village folk and were able to bring good influence bear upon them.

But I must confess with regret that my hope of putting constructive work on a permanent footing was not fulfilled. . . . As soon as my work in Champaran was finished, work outside drew me away. The few months' work in Champaran, however, took such deep root that influence in one form or another is to be observed there even today. 12

Whilst I was yet winding up my work [in Champaran,] there came a letter . . . about the condition of r in Ahmedabad. Wages were low, the [millhands] long been agitating for an increment and I had a e to guide them if I could. . . .

. . . My relations with [the mill owners] were friendly, and that made fighting with them the more difficult. I held consultations with them and requested them to refer the dispute to arbitration, but they refused recognize the principle of arbitration.

I had . . . to advise the laborers to go on strike. fore I did so, I . . . explained to them the conditions of a successful strike:

8 Ibid., Part V, Chapter 16, pp. 348-349.
9 Ibid., Part V, Chapter 19, p. 354.
11 Ibid., Part V, Chapter 17, pp. 350-351.
12 Ibid., Part V, Chapter 18, p. 353.
1. never to resort to violence.
2. never to molest [non-strikers].
3. never to depend upon alms, and
4. to remain firm no matter how long the strike continued and to earn bread during the strike by any other honest labor.

The strike went on for twenty-one days.

For the first two weeks, the millhands exhibited great courage and self-restraint, and daily held monster meetings. On these occasions I used to remind them of their pledge and they would shout back to me . . . that they would rather die than break their word.

But at last they began to show signs of flagging. Just as physical weakness in men manifests itself in irascibility, their attitude towards the [non-strikers] became more and more menacing as the strike seemed to weaken, and I began to fear an outbreak of rowdism.

The attendance at their daily meetings began to dwindle by degrees, and despondency and despair were writ large on the faces of those who did attend. Finally, the information was brought to me that the strikers had begun to totter. I felt deeply troubled, and set to thinking furiously as to what my duty was in the circumstances . . .

One morning—it was at a millhands' meeting—while I was still groping . . . the light came to me . . . "Unless the strikers rally," I declared to the meeting, "and continue the strike till a settlement is reached or till they leave the mills altogether, I will not touch any food."

The laborers were thunderstruck. [They] broke out, "Not you but we shall fast . . . Please forgive us for our lapse, we will now remain faithful to our pledge to the end."

"There is no need for you to fast," I replied. "It would be enough if you could remain true to your pledge. As you know, we are without funds and we do not want to continue our strike by living on public charity. You should therefore try to eke out a bare exist-

... The hearts of the mill owners were touched, and they set about discovering some means for a settlement. [The] strike was called off after I had fasted for only three days . . .

[To celebrate, the mill owners distributed sweets. Beggars intruded.]

The grinding poverty and starvation with which our country is afflicted is such that it drives more and more men every year into the ranks of beggars, whose desperate struggle for bread renders them insensible to all feelings of decency and self-respect. And our philanthropists, instead of providing work for them and insisting on their working . . . give them alms.

I must refuse to insult the naked by giving them clothes they do not need instead of giving them work which they sorely need. I will not commit the sin of becoming their patron but on learning that I had assisted in impoverishing them I would give them a privileged position and give them neither crumbs nor cast-off clothing but the best of my food and clothes and associate myself with them in work.

14 Ibid., Part V, Chapter 22, pp. 358-362.
15 Young India, October 13, 1921.
16 Ibid., Part V, Chapter 20, pp. 355-356.